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Bittersweet Realities: Field Research, Human Rights, and Questioning Intentions

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Bittersweet Realities

Field Research, Human Rights, and Questioning Intentions

LAURA ROOST AND RYAN LOWRY, WITH PATRICE MCMAHON

When Laura Roost and Ryan Lowry returned from their respective graduate fieldwork in Rwanda and the Balkans, their excited but bewildered debriefings were met by Professors Chantal Kalisa and Patrice McMahon, smiling and shaking their heads. Combined, Kalisa and McMahon had had extensive fieldwork experience in Africa, Europe, and Asia, and they saw in this debrief that the next generation of scholars was experiencing the same bittersweet realities of fieldwork that keeps researchers returning to the field despite ambiguities and frustrations.

In an ever-connected world, doing fieldwork is necessary even when it seems redundant. Scholars now have large and accessible data sets as well as repositories for primary documents that provide rich details of events on the ground, and graduate students feel the pull to avoid the financial and time costs of fieldwork in favor of these readily accessible data sets. This ambivalence about fieldwork holds true when researching war or economic development as much as it does when researching human rights, ethnic conflict, and even societal peace—issues of concern to all of us.[1] Research on the merits and challenges of fieldwork is abundant.[2] Logistical how-tos of fieldwork are also plentiful.[3] Kalisa's approach to both fieldwork and study abroad contributes crucial insight. Besides practical concerns, Kalisa was careful to ensure that her undergraduate study abroad students and graduate-level junior researchers all knew the importance of conscientious research.

Researchers can benefit from our conversations as members of the Transitional Justice reading group of graduate students and faculty from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Departments of Anthropology, Philosophy, Political Science, Modern Languages (the representative of which was Kalisa) and the School of Law. Kalisa's advice has implications for a variety of observational experiences, both in the field and in daily life. Sharing Kalisa's guidance may encourage faculty to mentor students with new lenses, lead junior scholars and graduate students to research conscientiously, and inspire undergraduate students to pursue challenging study abroad opportunities.

Central to Kalisa's conscientious research was listening, questioning, and being open to surprises. As a scholar, Kalisa showed a commitment to helping students at all levels appreciate the numerous, if conflicting, emotions and epiphanies one has before, during, and after fieldwork. A conscientious approach exposes the contradictory and sometimes frustrating realities of trying to gather and interpret data from the field. These bittersweet realities of fieldwork are necessary to truly understand the world, to listen and learn from local expertise, and to dialogue about political and social change in contextually grounded ways that compellingly reflect the lessons gained from intercultural research and dialogue. Such awareness of complexity is crucial in human rights research, as this research deals with intimate histories and experiences and leaves long-standing impacts on lives.

Kalisa's own pedagogical and research goals highlighted the importance of really listening to others rather than prioritizing one's own perspective. In her own research she gained new perspectives by taking the words of others seriously, and she, along with McMahon, was willing to help the next generation of scholars learn the same insights. As current and former graduate students, the authors of this essay share below their feelings about deciding to do field research, some complexities involved in gaining access, and advice from mentors for successfully understanding local answers and unresolved questions. Affect matters:

it is the often unspoken component of fieldwork that makes up much of the experience. Knowledge gained from fieldwork will not accurately reflect what the speakers convey unless researchers question their own motives, the ethical context of interactions, and the power relationships involved in research. In remembering Kalisa, the authors of this essay also highlight her guidance so as to share it with future generations of graduate students and junior scholars. Because thoughtful study abroad and fieldwork were so important to Kalisa, this essay emphasizes lessons from both her and McMahon in the hope that they facilitate the next generation to continue going to the field. Such research on the ground is rewarding intellectually, personally, and in connection with others, but its bittersweet reality includes emotional, ethical, and logistical challenges. Questioning intentions is the first lesson from Kalisa for preparing junior field researchers to encounter successes, challenges, and, yes, even failures in the field.

Ethics of Decolonizing Fieldwork and Study Abroad

What are the intentions of this research? What preconceptions and baggage do I bring with me? Am I ready to be surprised by what I find in the field? What am I giving to the local community when I conduct research, or am I only taking? Kalisa asked these questions, which were central to her pedagogical goals in study abroad and in her mentorship of junior researchers. Underlying these questions was an emphasis on decolonizing fieldwork and study abroad by rethinking their ethical implications.

While concerns about conducting research and study abroad are not new, Kalisa's unusual emphasis on sensitive, conscientious research underlines the importance of ethically grounded relationships before, during, and after fieldwork. Beginning with motivations prepares new researchers to enter this relational approach to fieldwork. Being clear about why one wants to go to a country to examine past or current human rights abuses, for example, reduces the odds that one's research will be intrusive, invasive, or misguided. In what follows, the essay authors

share their successes and challenges in approaching fieldwork through these key ethical lenses.

Questioning Intentions

At the center of ethical questions surrounding both study abroad and field research is relationship. What is the researcher's relationship to the research participants? What is the relationship between the researcher and local communities? What is the relationship of the knowledge produced to the various people involved in the process of knowledge production? These relationships can become obscured without emphasizing one's intention.

Questioning intentions for study abroad or for research encourages undergraduates, graduate students, and junior researchers to make an honest assessment of themselves. Those in the business field may use a SWOT assessment to clarify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Kalisa's emphasis on intentions requires students and junior researchers to fully evaluate themselves, their abilities, their research project, and their ethical motivations. This approach helps disturb narratives or assumptions that might otherwise alter the understanding of the field experience, and it leads students and researchers to question their preconceptions. Why do I need or want to research abroad? Roost found that "why" was pivotal when first considering research travel to Rwanda. Kalisa and McMahon responded with a discussion of their experiences of direct connections between researcher and participants. It may be cliché, but it is absolutely true that one gains much more by doing research in the country than by reading books and articles about that country. Yet the researcher must also ask, When researching and writing about an unfamiliar culture, what are my limitations?

Now a tenure-track faculty member, Roost finds in the process of mentoring students that the most useful advice highlights personal relationships; the personal matters in understanding local context, and this is the indispensable contribution that fieldwork makes to understanding. Learning what the community is about, seeing how people live every day, talking to other

scholars about their research, and talking to local scholars and ordinary individuals to get their perspective is how some of the deepest, most nuanced knowledge emerges.

Recognizing Preconceptions

Kalisa found that results in the field can depend on who manages or misuses received or preconceived ideas. Misperceptions and preconceived ideas about the African continent, for example, can be unearthed by paying attention to what kinds of photographs one wants to take. Is this picture appealing because it fulfills a cliché, such as a woman carrying a basket on her head or an acacia tree at sunset? Does this picture challenge a preconceived notion, of, say, Africans as villagers? What is the purpose of the picture? Kalisa's emphasis on decolonizing fieldwork and study abroad through interrogating preconceptions can lead to radically different practices of fieldwork. We must articulate the purpose of our actions, especially as a junior researcher if the temptation is to play the part of expert researcher when, in reality, we all need time to learn how to do fieldwork. Recognizing one's expectations, positionality, and relationship to participants, as well as taking honest account of preconceptions, allows for more credible interpretation of fieldwork data.

One's preconceptions also include what is known, and conversely what is not known, about local culture and how one's own cultural baggage can affect actions in the field. For example, what kinds of questioning are considered culturally appropriate? Study abroad students can find that some questions may not be perceived as simply concerned curiosity. Asking a survivor of genocide in Rwanda how they survived may seem like an innocent question, but when put into local context, it could be seen as accusatory. Similarly, understanding that callous comparison across cases can be perceived as erasing the uniqueness of a survivor's testimony is only truly possible if one is open to deep personal questioning of preconceptions.

Related to concerns about preconceptions and cultural baggage is the need to question logistical preconceptions as well.

When advising students and junior researchers on how to set up interviews, consider what linguistic preconceptions exist: In what language is the interviewee most comfortable? Just because a person can converse in English does not mean they are comfortable answering certain interview questions in English. There might be reasons an individual does not want to speak in English, even if they are capable of doing so. Researchers need to establish such information early. If they are not fluent in the preferred language, researchers will need interpreters. This issue did not occur to Roost, who lost an interview opportunity because of it.

Welcoming Surprises

Questioning intentions and preconceptions ensures that study abroad students and junior researchers are open to the lessons of their research location and research participants and are willing to be surprised. Both study abroad and field research require flexibility and constant questioning of one's explicit and implicit responses to what one observes or hears in conscientious research. Although Lowry was involved in a program at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, he was encouraged to work into his schedule a trip to the Balkans to experience the environment that the ICTY's work addressed. Similarly, Roost was encouraged to book a trip to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha.

As part of the Human Rights and Transitional Justice group, both McMahon and Kalisa stressed the importance of seizing the opportunity of being so close to the Balkans while doing work at the ICTY. They advised that at the very least Lowry had to visit the area he wanted to study, even if he didn't have a sponsoring institution or clearly defined research agenda. Getting the opportunity to engage with the local culture, they noted, would be essential for doing any future fieldwork or gaining expertise in that area. Lowry especially remembers talking about how some of the best memories of doing fieldwork came from small interactions with locals and how these interactions often led to opportunities to gain a better understanding of research ques-

tions. Sometimes an impromptu conversation with someone at a café can have a profound impact on the direction of fieldwork. This is what being open to surprises, as Kalisa called it, means in practice.

Key areas of surprise include language and cultural sensitivity. Are translators and interpreters available? Even if English is widely spoken and understood, a working knowledge of the local language will go far.[4] Often students who study human rights will be conducting research in countries with less prominent languages. Opportunities for U.S. students to study, for example, Khmer, Sinhala, Tamil, Kinyarwanda, or other local languages are unfortunately slim. Despite the size and importance of the post-Yugoslav states to U.S. foreign policy, only a few universities offer courses in Serbo-Croatian, a language essential for doing fieldwork throughout the Balkans.

Anyone who has done fieldwork knows that much preparation is required. Setting up interviews takes time, and local customs affect the scheduling. Whether or not interviewees prefer emails or phone calls, for example, makes a difference in initial impressions. Locating an appropriate interpreter, rather than just any interpreter, similarly takes time. And even the best laid plans can and usually do go awry. Although experienced researchers know this, Kalisa would encourage study abroad students and junior researchers to practice humility and be open to surprises.

Often potential interviewees, such as NGO workers, government officials, and even military personnel, hold high-ranking positions or have careers that frequently make them inaccessible. Researchers cannot expect to have unlimited access or time with these individuals, and so researchers need flexible plans. Lowry's research at the ICTY was done through a program involving a number of students interested in transitional justice and international law. Interviews with court employees (judges, officials from the Office of the Prosecutor, members of the defense teams, and other court personnel) were set up in advance, but the time for the interviews was limited by tight participant schedules. Because of changes in the court schedule, some interviews

had to be rescheduled. Others who were available filled the suddenly empty time slots. Keeping this in mind can help junior researchers prepare ahead of time for such situations.

Unscheduled participants can often provide additional information beneficial to the research. At the same time, novice researchers may have difficulty recovering from unexpected interruptions in their well-planned agenda. New researchers must learn to adjust their line of questions accordingly. Unscheduled interviews can also make the research process feel a bit haphazard. At the end of the day researchers may review their notes and sense a lack of coherence. Lowry encountered this challenge at the ICTY. It was not that the information gained from unscheduled interviews was unhelpful—in fact quite the opposite. Unscheduled interviews opened up new ideas unexplored in previous interviews. While such occasions spur research in new areas, they risk making a project's scope overly broad. Researchers should be mindful of both the benefits and pitfalls of unscheduled interviews.

In addition to being open to surprises in the field, study abroad students and junior researchers will benefit from openness to surprises upon return. Rarely do we return from field work with a definitive answer to research questions. In fact we often return with more questions than when we started, as with Lowry's research at the ICTY. Lowry's initial question explored what was happening to facilitate the completion strategies for the tribunal and to transition responsibilities for domestic courts in the Balkans. What emerged was a whole new set of questions that begged for further exploration: In what ways does the ICTY (or any other international court) contribute to international law? What are the responsibilities of the court to both the prosecution and the defense?[5] One particularly interesting event simultaneous with Lowry's field work was the contempt of tribunal trial of Florence Hartmann. She was not on trial for war crimes or crimes against humanity committed in the former Yugoslavia. Instead, as a former spokesperson for the prosecutor, she was accused of disclosing confidential information in violation of a court order.[6] An entirely new set of questions emerged. Why,

when the ICTY is facing a deadline to complete all current and pending cases, does it use resources to try a contempt case? How does this trial fit with the current ICTY mandate?[7] It is not easy to set these new questions aside and return to the original research question. It is necessary, however; otherwise the research focus becomes cloudy and results lose coherence.

Kalisa and McMahon would often talk about how important those new questions are for scholars and for future research. Because those questions came from personal experiences in the field, they likely have yet to be explored by others. Fieldwork experiences often provide a rich pool of questions that researchers can tap into for future work, and they often drive the desire to continue to go out into the field and learn from and with others.

Reciprocal Relationships

Kalisa encouraged students to question reciprocal relationships in research. Noting experiences of researchers who complete many interviews but remain unclear about the benefit, Kalisa advised thinking carefully about what is given back to the local community and about disseminating research locally. Based on advice from Kalisa, Roost organized a research presentation at the local university in Kigali and invited organizations that had been involved to come and hear preliminary research findings. This approach offered an opportunity for participants to hear Roost's findings, to question those lessons, to provide clarifications, and to push the discussion back to local implications. There are of course many other ways one can share the benefits of research with the participants, but ethical research should not merely extract knowledge; colonial powers have historically taken so many resources.

Considering the community where research is conducted, reciprocating can also take the form of additional training or opportunities for research assistants and translators. For example, a public research presentation can ensure that local residents get to hear the processing of knowledge produced through interviews, and it can provide opportunities for an interpreter or

research assistant to get additional exposure by interpreting for public research presentations. Conscientious awareness of the person doing the labor of translating or interpreting is a vital component of giving back. Plan to provide fair and just wages for the interpreter, and find out what relationship the interpreter hopes to have with research. Might local students benefit from class credit or internship credit for their work? Do they want to be more involved in learning about the research process themselves? What can the interpreter teach the researcher and what can the researcher teach them? How can the relationship be one of mutual respect and knowledge exchange?

Remembering Sweetness

What is gained from field research is a perspective that a book can never give. There is no substitute for learning about human rights from those affected by human rights violations or those who have perpetrated human rights violations. In a world of easily accessible data sets, where temptation to skip the bittersweet realities of fieldwork can be enticing, such advice and reassurance from experienced researchers can help study abroad students and junior researchers better understand the sweetness that comes with ethically conscientious field research. Fieldwork is the beginning of a relationship. The key to fieldwork is knowing how to listen with humility. These lessons from Kalisa made a clear difference in many of her study abroad students and graduate students.

Kalisa centered her study abroad program in Rwanda on decolonizing the experience so that the realities, both bitter and sweet, of context can be appreciated, and this approach framed her recommendations for field research as well. Of the students who went on that study abroad in 2009 with Kalisa and Gallimore, a good number have continued global engagement in various ways through subsequent Fulbright fellowships, ongoing Kinyarwanda language development, travel to other countries, and work in other countries. Knowing and experiencing the bittersweet realities of fieldwork helps students and researchers ask the questions Kalisa often asked in her teaching and research:

What are the intentions in this research? What preconceptions and baggage do I bring with me? Am I open to being surprised by what I find in the field? What am I giving to the local community when I conduct research, or am I only taking? Most of all, Kalisa was an advocate of thoughtful field research and study abroad precisely because she knew that it was difficult but rewarding. Understanding the bittersweet realities of field research, as well as being open to the challenges, rewards, and lessons of the field, provides the in-depth, rewarding knowledge that many people enter graduate programs to attain. It is with these thoughts of Kalisa and her legacy that we write, *do not be afraid*; remember fieldwork is the beginning, not the end. Embrace its complexities and contradictions, and mentor others to do likewise.

Notes

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4. Bujra, "Lost in Translation?"; Koomen, "'Without These Women, the Tribunal Cannot Do Anything'"; Scoggins, "Navigating Fieldwork as an Outsider"; Sirnate, "Positionality, Personal Insecurity, and Female Empathy in Security Studies Research"; Tanu and Dales, "Language in Fieldwork."

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